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ABSTRACT

Academic liaison--the two-way communication between a particular academic area and the library, focused through an individual or group of library staff--has received little attention in the debate about performance measurement. Changes have taken place in higher education libraries in both scale, with the growth of student numbers, and intent, with the move from being passive book depositories to becoming partners in course delivery. Academic liaison activities include: committee or course board membership; user education; materials selection and collection development; bookfund management; advice and assistance; developing and maintaining subject awareness; cataloging and classification; course planning and development; and monitoring the feedback loop. Liaison relationships are with: individual academics and student researchers; academic management; library representatives and committees; course teams and subject groups; students; administrative staff; and other library staff. The paper discusses the context of the higher education library; importance of the academic liaison; definition of the academic liaison position; how to measure the effectiveness of a liaison; and if measuring liaison performance will have any significance. A consensus view on the definition of an academic liaison is a prerequisite to measuring effectiveness. (SWC)

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by Hilary Johnson

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Performance Measurement of Academic Liaison in Higher Education Libraries

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Introduction

I would like to focus upon an area of library work which has so far received scant attention in the debate about performance measurement - that of academic liaison. Very little seems to have been written about academic liaison in this country, although there is some literature emanating from the US. I would like to begin with some contextual comments which bear upon liaison, review why performance measurement of liaison is currently important, attempt to define what I at least mean by academic liaison, and review some of the ways in which the effectiveness of liaison may be measured. For this talk I am using the term 'academic liaison' in the sense of 'two-way communication between a particular academic area and the library, focused through an individual or group of library staff'.

Context: the Higher Education Library Scene

Firstly I would like to briefly highlight some contextual factors which bear on the subject. The Follett report (Joint . . , 1993) was a major landmark in acknowledging the enormous changes that have taken place in higher education libraries, in terms of both scale - the growth in student numbers - and intent - the desire of librarians that libraries cease being passive book depositories and become 'a partner in course delivery' (para 145).

For those of us reading the Follett Report in what were by then 'new universities', the changing role of the library was something which we had been living for several years. I am probably not the only one to experience a sense of déjà vu on reading Follett. I quote from an internal paper prepared for the users' committee at Brighton Polytechnic (as then was) in 1981. This identified the 'need to turn the library from being a passive storehouse of information into a subject- and course-based consultancy, information, training and resources service'. This was not even new in 1981 - the statement here is in itself a quote from an earlier statement of the learning resources ideal.

Even before the recent growth in student numbers there were distinct tendencies, certainly amongst the polytechnics, to student-centred learning, in many cases triggered by (or at least provided with a rationale by) new technology and organisational convergence. In this regard, Clive Hewitt, the first Head of Learning Resources at Brighton Polytechnic, was a pioneer in developments in integrated approaches to learner support. In those days the 'new technology' which provided the push was of course video technology, and the organisational convergence was that of libraries and media services units.

Follett was followed by Fielden (John . . , 1993). This authenticated more of these changes, and attempted to assess the future role of LIS personnel, highlighting changes such as 'the roles of staff will alter with those currently labelled as "professional" playing a greater role in learner support and academic liaison while other staff provide the technical support and enquiry services'. Again, a sense of déjà vu. The Brighton Polytechnic document quoted above goes on to state that, because of this shift in emphasis, the need would exist for 'specialist staff working with teaching and educational development staff and with media specialists in flexible groupings.' These specialist staff were to become the Course Resources Officers responsible for the liaison function.

So, in many libraries the sorts of changes which Follett and Fielden observed and predicted were not seen as futuristic but were the here and now of our working lives. An intrinsic part of this approach is the ideal of 'academic liaison', of which more later.

Other aspects of the current context in HE libraries have not got quite such a long history. One area of our work that has become omnipresent and yet was not envisaged in 1981 is the 'academic audit', using this term to mean both the process-driven examinations of our institutional systems and the subject-based quality assessments. I have now been in two institutions which have been through the 'academic audit' mill, and it appears to be one of the more thorough 'mills' through which to go. Having also been involved in a number of subject assessment visits, these appear to be more variable in terms of the impact upon and consideration of library matters. Both sorts of activity are compara-

tively recent and yet are already assuming the status of monumental landmarks in the scenery of HE. The Research Assessment Exercise looms for 1996.

The Eighties also saw the advent of some other 'spirits of the times' which are still with us - Efficiency and Effectiveness, the two 'E's, and the related idea of 'value for money'. There was also increased emphasis on 'customer care' and service charters. I am not sure that 'customer care' was really anything new for libraries, but the 'value for money' idea, explicitly articulated, was one of the more intractable notions with which to try and marry the ideals of the early Learning Resources pioneers at Brighton. The fact of the matter was that the system of liaison librarians at Brighton was (and remains) costly to maintain.

I spoke earlier of the organisational convergence of libraries and media. Nowadays it is convergence with IT that is the bandwagon. However this is to deal slightingly with perhaps a much more fundamental technology-led change in libraries. The marriage between libraries and media was perhaps always rather a 'shotgun' affair and certainly not all the converged services of today have entered into the state of matrimony totally willingly. Nevertheless librarians have as a breed embraced the call of the computer in a way which never seemed to happen with 'media'. Perhaps this has most to do with the comfort of text as opposed to the anarchy of images.

A final contextual point is my perception that the advent of subject librarianship is linked very closely with the notion of a flexible, responsive, service which is intrinsically part of the academic process. In this regard many of the 'older' universities are able to demonstrate a longer history of subject specialisms, although perhaps originally this was more to do with acquisitions, cataloguing and classification than with user education or involvement in course planning. The notion of 'subject librarians' with specific links to academic organisational areas was something which I believe the 'new universities' took up and developed in an extensive fashion. It is interesting that Richard Heseltine (1995), writing recently in the *Library Association record*, has seen fit to fire a salvo on the idea of subject librarianship, looking at it from the 'network training' point of view. Where will that leave academic liaison?

Why is Academic Liaison Important?

The HE sector itself is drawing attention to the quality of the link between libraries and academic staff. The following is from the Higher Education Quality Council (HEQC) report *Learning from audit* (1994):

> 'The adequacy of linkages between library/computer services and different departments also varied . . . In several cases, the working relationships between academics and library staff were unclear.' (Chapter 7, para 10)

The report also noted the lack of involvement of the library in the new programme planning process in several audits. 'Similarly, it was unclear at some universities how changes in demand for existing programmes could be monitored and fed back to the library to ensure that sound judgements were made about the resource implications for the library.' (Chapter 7, para 11)

This follows on from the recommendations in the Follett Report that:

> '. . . as part of their overall information planning, institutions should ensure that there is effective coordination between teaching staff and those responsible for library and related provision'. (Para 146)

and

> '. . . that the existence of these procedures should be taken into account by the HEQC and the teaching quality assessments made by the Funding Councils.' (Para 147)

The SCONUL librarians have taken this into account in their proposals for the development of performance indicators, summarised in their report *The effective academic library* (Joint . . . , 1995):

> P1 Integration
>
> P1.4 Liaison between service providers and users
>
> 'Evidence of formal and informal communication channels between the library service, the senior management of the institution, academics and students is required in order to assess the degree of effective and dynamic communication to inform service provision.'

There is further consideration of liaison in the section on user satisfaction . . . 'Through this mix of formal and informal liaison, library and faculty staff can make a formative evaluation of the relevance of the library's objectives and goals, identify any problems being experienced by users, and give consideration to suggestions and recommendations for improvements.'

To these sectoral pressures can be added the pressures at the institution level - the continuing driving down of the unit of resource, the insistence on

demonstrable 'value for money', and the need to justify resources spent on libraries, and librarians' salaries!

What do we Mean by Academic Liaison?

I would like to talk about what I mean by academic liaison under two broad headings - activities and relationships. My personal view is that academic liaison is primarily about the latter, but that what librarians actually *do* as context to this is important because it is the catalyst for the establishment of the relationships. My list of activities is essentially formulated from my experience of 'subject librarianship' in four institutions. Your perspective may suggest a slightly different list.

liaison activities

- committee / course board membership
- user education
- materials selection and collection development
- bookfund management
- advice and assistance (individuals or eg. seminar groups)
- developing and maintaining subject awareness
- cataloguing and classification*
- course planning and development
- monitoring the feedback loop

(* Classification is often seen as legitimately part of the liaison role in a way which cataloguing is not.)

The activities provide the stimulus for dialogue and exchange with an academic area. If all or most of these activities are centred in an individual librarian, the onus for effective liaison is a heavy burden on that one individual. Nowadays the advent of the subject team is a great way to spread the burden. Of course, in many libraries *not* organised on a subject basis the spread of these activities may have been through practically the whole of the 'professional' staff. In some libraries the liaison roles are superimposed upon a functional organisational structure, with individuals wearing two hats - for example, responsible for acquisitions and for liaison with the Chemistry Department.

Of these activities some are the traditional preserve of the librarian (book selection, cataloguing and classification, enquiry work). The areas which are perhaps most concerned with what I shall call the 'subject librarian' approach to liaison are user education, course planning and development, and the gamut of feedback activities.

User education is well established as a sub-specialism and at one time was considered trendy enough to almost have its own specialist staff. My initial role at Plymouth Polytechnic (now the University of Plymouth) was very close to this and I even underwent a short-term transmogrification into a 'User Education Librarian' at one point. This was short-lived as the push towards focusing on at least some kind of sub-area in terms of subject matter was irresistible. Perhaps the area where the 'partnership in course delivery' is currently most obvious is the involvement of library staff in course planning and development. The shift towards modular course models has not limited this involvement, indeed in some cases it has provided a positive impetus, and a number of instances where subject librarians have been drawn into devising, delivering and assessing student work have been apparent. On a more limited basis a number of institutions have mechanisms for involving subject librarians in assessing the resource implications of new course developments. This is markedly so at Nene College, where the course planning activity requires input from the Faculty Librarians in order for a new development to achieve planning 'approval'. Whilst this is valuable and necessary it seems to limit the perception of academic colleagues into thinking that library staff are only concerned with the pounds, shillings and pence of a course.

Another key area for liaison is the monitoring of feedback from students, not just for library concerns, but often a level of participation in overall feedback monitoring which comes when the liaison librarians are seen as sufficiently part of the academic process to understand and empathise with the students, whilst at the same time sufficiently detached to be seen as objective. Involvement of the Course Resources Officers in what were known as 'Student Consultation Exercises' at Brighton was at a high level when this particular form of feedback gathering was being extensively used.

relationships

- with individual academics and students, researchers
- with academic hierarchy (management)
- with library representatives/ library committees
- with course teams/subject groups
- with course groups (students)
- with administrative staff
- with rest of library staff

Like all relationships these are complex and liable to friction. Again, if all these relationships are centred in one individual (or even a team) that is a lot to ask. One particular point I would like to make is that the individual (or team of) liaison librarian(s) is 'piggy in the middle' between the library and the academic area. Views from the academic area are to be forwarded to library (and increasingly, converged service) colleagues, and responses (or lack of them) have to be fed back, rounded out and justified to the academic area. The effectiveness of the liaison has to be measured both ways. The status of the individual or the team is crucial to this - not enough weight to get their arguments heard and they lose credibility in the academic area. Too strong a voice for one area might lead to an imbalance in the service. The relative 'pecking orders' of different departments or faculties in this regard is an interesting variable.

A number of factors bear upon these relationships, and can affect how they develop, and just how effective they are:

- status (whether librarian seen as equal to academic staff - often boils down to pay)
- individual character and personality
- experience and subject knowledge
- organisation within library (ie. status within the library pecking order)
- level of responsibility (eg. being a budget holder)
- relative organisational or 'political' position of academic area
- how forward-thinking the area is, or open to new ideas.

Whilst some at least of the activities which liaison librarians undertake can be measured in a quantitative fashion, measuring the quality of these relationships is a far more complex issue.

How Might we Measure the Effectiveness of Liaison?

There are some actual or potentially quantifiable elements, such as:

- no. of library staff involved
- ftes per member of liaison staff
- numbers of hours of user education
- user education per fte
- membership of appropriate committees/boards
- proportion of time engaged in formal communications (meetings!)
- no. of enquiries/requests for advice

The number of library staff involved in direct liaison may be measurable, if the organisation of such activities is confined to a section of the staff. If, on the other hand, you take the view that all staff are involved in liaison, this is less meaningful. A more established measure is the user education activity. The COPOL (now SCONUL) Statistics produced annually have been including figures for this for some time now. The performance indicators included in *The effective academic library* (Joint . . , 1995) include 'number of students receiving post-induction instruction in information-handling skills'. There is a trend to separating out 'induction' or 'orientation' sessions from post-induction, which is probably a valid distinction to draw. Many chief librarians have probably watched these numbers grow at a greater pace than student numbers with a certain satisfaction. Is, however, 'more' necessarily an indicator of 'better'? I suspect (I know) that despite much literature on the subject of evaluating user education it is still the Cinderella part.

Just a note about committee work. It seems that the more collegial the modus operandi of an HE institution, the more committees it has. Course committees, boards of study, faculty boards, quality enhancement committees, the list is endless. Since liaison librarians do spend considerable portions of their time in committees it seems on the one hand a straightforward measure. On the other hand this may have little to do with effectiveness!

Many areas of the liaison function are qualitative in kind:

- user satisfaction
- academic quality assessments
- reputation or standing within academic area
- being in-demand
- effectiveness as a teacher - evaluation of user education
- position within the library - the 'gatekeeper'
- 'trouble-free' nature of relationship?

User satisfaction questionnaires quite often identify things like the 'helpfulness' of the library staff overall, however it is usually considered invidious to single out any individuals or groups for comment. I am not aware of many surveys of satisfaction amongst teaching or academic staff, at least in this country, as a separate group which might more use-

fully focus on their perceptions of how the liaison functions. Some studies have been undertaken in the United States. I have heard of one institution which was regularly gathering input from academic areas as to their perceptions of the liaison librarian, as a contribution to a quality enhancement programme. However I have yet to hear any teaching staff say that 'their' subject librarian is other than the most wonderful human being alive - any variation is in the warmth with which this is asserted.

When your subject librarians are inundated with requests for help, advice and user education sessions, you might feel some justification in thinking they are doing a good job, so 'being in-demand' may be one of the best indicators. Measuring this would involve combining a number of factors which are difficult to equate. Does effective user education stimulate enquiries or deflect them? This is similar to the difficulty in assessing whether a 'trouble-free' relationship with an academic area is a good or bad thing. Too smooth a relationship may indicate insufficient challenge to accepted orthodoxies on the part of the liaison librarian. Some particular case studies may be the way to proceed.

Will Measuring Liaison Performance Mean Anything?

As with many other performance indicators the caveats which can be found are many and various. Like all our areas of work it is bound up with questions of resource adequacy. Circumstances may vary so much from one academic area to another that drawing comparisons even within that institution may be impossible. It seems to me to be one of those areas where the process of making the attempt is the important factor. The end result may be too ill-defined to be of much direct use (probably trying to compare across libraries would be pretty meaningless). However, as we found at Brighton, putting a considerable emphasis on effective liaison is an expensive affair. If the 'learner support' ideal for the future of academic libraries is to be followed, we must have some means of assessing the effectiveness of the results, and we had better start now by making some more systematic attempts to measure what we can. As a first step I feel there needs to be more discussion about what we mean by liaison. Ironically enough, a major part of this will have to be asking academic areas about their views. Surveys such as that reported from Kent State University (Ryan et al, 1995) should be repeated more widely. It is my hope that this paper will stimulate others to consider what their definition of liaison is so that we can stumble towards some consensus on what we need to do to measure its effectiveness.

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